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Taiwan has significant strategic importance for the military balance in the western Pacific.¹ A potential US-China conflict across the Taiwan Strait could possibly escalate into a protracted war with global repercussions, or even a nuclear war.² Due to Japan's geographical proximity to Taiwan, the US-Japan alliance will play a consequential role for great power competition in the region. China's rapid military modernization and a possible change of the status quo over Taiwan have been some of the key factors driving Japan's upgraded defense posture and the gradual transformation of the US-Japan alliance from a platform mainly to support US power projection to jointly creating military power.³ Since the 2010s, Japanese leaders have started to explicitly state Taiwan's importance to Japan's security, culminating in a joint statement announced during then-Japanese Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga's visit to Washington in April 2021 that the United States and Japan "underscored the importance of peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait and encouraged the peaceful resolution of cross-Strait issues."⁴ Most recently, Japanese Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi publicly suggested in November 2025 that an armed conflict across the Taiwan Strait could be a "survival-threatening situation" for Japan that would prompt the deployment of the Self-Defense Force.⁵

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When and how Japan would militarily intervene in a Taiwan scenario is highly contingent

However, when and how Japan responds to a Taiwan scenario is highly contingent on how such an event actually unfolds. As a result, existing literature has

focused, for instance, on highlighting the fundamental continuity in Tokyo's Taiwan policy since the late 1970s, which is an important contribution to managing the expectation gap concerning what Japan could feasibly do in case of a contingency.⁶ Despite the series of defense reforms in the past fifteen years, there remain political and legal constraints on Japan's use of military force—especially absent an explicit attack on Japanese soil—

which also influence the operations of the US armed forces stationed in Japan.⁷ Japan has legally-designated “scenarios” under which the Japanese Self Defense Force (JSDF) is authorized to use force, but they are vaguely defined and hinge upon political decisions made at the time of the crisis.⁸

A contingency over Taiwan is also likely to unfold not within a self-confined scenario, but instead as a sequence of different scenarios that animate the overall escalation dynamic. In other words, as the trajectory of Russia-Ukraine war since 2014 suggests, it is not necessarily helpful to treat gray zone provocations and an armed conflict as a dichotomy since they are often simply different phases in a single conflict. It is, therefore, not a productive analytical exercise to predict Japan's potential role in a specific scenario concerning Taiwan. In addition, while Japan's defense buildups at the tactical level often attract attention, it is crucial to assess how new capabilities and enhanced posture inform the US-Japan alliance's overall strategy and operational approach to shaping Beijing's strategic calculations.⁹ Given the consequential role that the alliance has upon Taiwan's security, a closer assessment of this alliance's potential contribution to deterrence across the Taiwan Strait is warranted.

This analysis is especially crucial given that there are hurdles to fostering direct military cooperation, such as between Tokyo and Taipei, due to the latter's unique political circumstances.¹⁰ The current approach pursued by the United States and Japan, which focuses on raising China's cost to initiate a conflict, resonates with Taiwan's gradual embrace of a defense strategy that focuses on deterring a military invasion.¹¹ However, a disintegration of political objectives or military means among the relevant parties would not only undermine deterrence but also become a recipe for an unintended crisis.¹²

The high likelihood of war over Taiwan becoming protracted would make initiating a war across the Taiwan Strait a huge gamble for Beijing.¹³ A protracted war not only imposes exorbitant costs, but also makes the chances of ultimate success difficult to predict.¹⁴ While unification with Taiwan is an important

political goal for China's "national rejuvenation," a protracted war over the Strait would most likely result in sacrificing another key underlying agenda for the Chinese Communist Party that is directly linked to regime survival: a robust and sustainable economic development.¹⁵ In other words, it is crucial to make it abundantly clear that there is no clear path toward a quick and decisive victory in an armed conflict across the Taiwan Strait.

This article argues that the US-Japan alliance's ongoing investment in measures—from modernizing the alliance command and control structure, to Tokyo's growing focus on territorial defense especially in the southwest islands, to the growing latticework of multilateral defense relationships—bolsters deterrence by significantly raising the cost for China of initiating a military conflict and expanding their capacity to endure and prevail in a war of attrition. These efforts to jointly generate deterrent power illuminate the growing need for Washington to work much more closely with allies and partners.¹⁶

This article begins by illustrating the different possible cross-Strait scenarios and Taiwan's approach to its own defense. It then analyses how the measures that have been taken by the US-Japan alliance could contribute to bolstering cross-Strait deterrence. Subsequently, it explores some of the shortcomings that would remain despite an effective implementation of deterrence, such as gray zone provocations. In conclusion, it will highlight avenues for further consideration, including ways to shift from deterrence to actual combat in a worst-case scenario.

Defining the Challenge

As China articulates its strong determination to unify Taiwan, there has been a growing concern that Beijing may resort to the use of brute force.¹⁷ Beijing has indeed gradually intensified its military coercion and intimidation against Taiwan, which culminated in three military exercises surrounding the island in 2024.¹⁸ Amphibious operations are notoriously difficult to conduct, and an invasion of Taiwan is not necessarily an easy endeavor. Nevertheless, a full-scale military conflict would be an existential threat to Taiwan.¹⁹

As the need to enhance Taiwan's military readiness grows, there is growing interest in Taipei in an asymmetric approach that focuses on territorial defense and conventional deterrence. This includes the Overall Defense Concept (ODC), a doctrine promoted by Admiral Lee Hsi-ming, former chief of the general staff of the Republic of China (Taiwan) Armed Forces.²⁰ The ODC pays attention to the material capabilities imbalance between Beijing and Taiwan and focuses on an asymmetric defense posture that emphasizes dispersion, mobility, and denial.²¹ Taiwan's approach is designed to demonstrate Taipei's

willingness to fight and to shape Beijing's policy choices by making military aggression a costly and unattractive option.²²

Moreover, it is important to note that Taiwan's asymmetric approach to defense could facilitate closer coordination with the United States, Japan, and other partners. The reasons behind this are twofold. First, as Ukraine's resistance against Russian aggression has demonstrated, in the case of a war, Taiwan's self-reliance and ability to fight would necessitate garnering international support including the intervention of the United States, Japan, and other like-minded states. Second, the ODC's asymmetric nature resonates with the United States and Japan's approach to deterrence that focuses on raising China's cost to initiate a war and developing the capacity to prevail in a war of attrition. The ODC could, therefore, serve as a basis to further expand and facilitate strategic coordination among the United States, Taiwan, and other partners such as Japan.²³ Relatedly, in case of a conflict, the ODC helps clarify divisions of labor and entry points in the case of direct US intervention.

However, by specifically focusing on developing the capacity to counter a

The focus on countering a Chinese invasion has limited relevance to gray zone tactics

Chinese invasion, the ODC's emphasis on asymmetric operational concepts has limited relevance to other means that China could employ to coerce Taiwan, such as gray zone tactics—coercive tactics that fall short of outright military action.²⁴ The ODC is conscious of the need for prioritization and tradeoffs in defense planning due to finite resources. Responding to every Chinese gray zone provocation would be costly and could drain Taipei's military resources, which is possibly one of the goals of Beijing's repeated incursions.

Additionally, many of China's gray zone provocations, such as repeatedly violating Taiwan's airspace and territorial waters, do not constitute an existential threat to Taiwan. Hence, it is necessary to accept certain risks in the gray zone.²⁵

However, as Taiwan and its partners bolster their deterrence against Chinese military aggression, it will become preferable for Beijing to choose means that fall short of conflict in pursuing their political goals to unify Taiwan.²⁶ In other words, China may seek to *forcefully* pursue a "peaceful unification" with Taiwan by adopting coercive—yet non-militaristic—means. In general, the post-WWII territorial integrity norm has made the explicit use of force costly for achieving political ends, especially in changing territorial status quos.²⁷ States with revisionist intent often resort to means that are short of armed conflict as a way to control escalation. These observations are evident in Beijing's "limited war doctrine" since the early 1990s that has largely been focused on

winning localized wars.²⁸ Chinese military writing has indeed had a heavy emphasis on controlling escalation in a conventional war, including preventing external intervention, which a protracted war may entail.²⁹ In other words, gray zone tactics are a means for Beijing to limit the scope of their operation and achieve their political objectives with minimal costs.³⁰ Gray zone provocations, including a *fait accompli*, would complicate the responses of external powers—the United States chief among them, as well as Japan—in determining when and how to intervene to respond to Chinese coercion against Taiwan.

While there are number of ways that China could coerce Taiwan without the explicit use of force, two approaches stand out as ways that could lead to a significant change in the status quo: namely, a quarantine scenario and the seizure of Taiwan's outlying island such as Kinmen and Matsu. Recent studies have underscored how a quarantine scenario, a "law enforcement-led operation to control maritime or air traffic within a specific area," is a feasible option for Beijing to coerce Taiwan.³¹ While often conflated with a blockade, a quarantine scenario has several important distinctions that deserve attention. A blockade is an act of war implemented with the application of military force, often intended to coerce the opponent into submission. They are comprehensive in scope and have often been considered as the "ultimate" weapon (before the advent of nuclear weapons) given their detrimental impact upon a state's survival.³² A quarantine, on the other hand, is led by law enforcement bodies such as coast guards and is limited in scope—both in terms of space and time. They would likely be short-term and selective attempts to disrupt maritime traffic into Taiwan, for instance, taking the form of a "law enforcement activity" such as custom inspections. As such, a quarantine would not be considered a military action, but rather an extension of gray zone provocations. While seemingly less significant compared to a blockade, if conducted cumulatively, it could have a significant economic and psychological impact upon Taiwan. The scale and duration of each session of a quarantine could be deliberately limited so as not to trigger a response from the United States or other external powers. While these types of coercion may not immediately result in a drastic change in the status quo in isolation, they could have a cumulative impact that could erode Taiwan's political autonomy and force Taipei into negotiations with Beijing.³³

Furthermore, the possibility of the seizure of Taiwan's offshore islands, including but not limited to Kinmen and Matsu, also requires attention.³⁴ An amphibious invasion of these islands, especially Kinmen, would indeed be challenging due to their heavy fortification and Taiwan's defensive advantage, as demonstrated during the Taiwan Strait Crisis in the 1950s. In two separate occasions in the 1950s, Beijing sought to conquer Kinmen, which is merely two miles off-coast from the Chinese city of Xiamen. Nevertheless, if one takes Kinmen as an example, China could use non-military means such as economic and

infrastructure integration to gradually change the status quo for Kinmen by challenging the median line in the Taiwan Strait.³⁵ In addition, Beijing has started to assert their claim that the Taiwan Strait is “inland waters” (as opposed to international waters), including in their announcement in February 2024 that they would conduct regular law enforcement patrols in the waters between Xiamen and Kinmen.³⁶ In other words, as security expert Alessio Patalano observes, China appears to be gradually pursuing its strategic objectives to alter the cross-Strait status quo by mobilizing “political and legal rhetorical tools to present military and constabulary coercive activities as lawful and measured responses.”³⁷ These measures short of armed conflict may not immediately lead to an existential threat for Taiwan, yet they could significantly change the status quo by eroding Taipei’s political autonomy.

How the US-Japan Alliance Could Bolster Deterrence

Japan has gradually embraced military power as one of the central components of its national strategy since the 2010s.³⁸ Especially in the 2020s, Japan’s defense reforms have focused more on ways to generate effective combat power including the acquisition of counterstrike capabilities.³⁹ Tokyo’s upgraded defense strategy is designed primarily for the archipelago state’s territorial defense. Nevertheless, the geographical proximity of Japan’s southwest islands suggests that a military action against Taiwan—either a full-scale invasion or a blockade—would likely have direct consequences for Japan’s national security, including territorial defense.⁴⁰ As a result, there has been a growing debate on how Japan, alongside the United States, could deter Chinese aggression across the Taiwan Strait.

As US military primacy in the western Pacific erodes, the United States and Japan now operate under a contested space. As a result, instead of relying on military primacy, an approach that focuses on enhancing force survivability and restricting China’s freedom of movement to complicate a war has become a central component of US defense strategy in the region. The different measures taken to implement such an approach to deterrence have broader benefits that contribute to improving the military balance over the Taiwan Strait. The United States and Japan have been investing in measures such as modernizing the alliance’s command and control (C2) structure, fortifying Japan’s Sakishima Islands, and expanding multilateral defense partnerships. These steps could significantly complicate China’s calculus in initiating a full-scale military action against Taiwan, chiefly by denying Beijing the ability to achieve a quick victory or prevail in a protracted war, making a military option unattractive for China. Many of the measures are still at a nascent stage and face political and organizational hurdles for full implementation. Nevertheless, they could all

play an important role in shaping Chinese perceptions about the regional military balance across the Taiwan Strait.

Improving Alliance Command and Control

Modernizing its command and control framework has been one of the top agendas for the alliance.⁴¹ In March 2025, Japan launched a Japanese Self-Defense Force Joint Operations Command (JJOC) to foster integration among the Ground, Maritime, and Air Self Defense Forces. This was followed by an announcement by US Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth that the United States initiated plans to upgrade US Forces Japan to work closely with the JJOC.⁴²

While it is too early to tell what the upgraded alliance C2 structure would look like, the two allies are seeking to update their coordinating framework as a new “war-fighting command” with an emphasis on integration. An updated alliance C2 structure could make Washington’s seamless intervention in a military conflict across the Taiwan Strait, if necessary, much more credible.⁴³ Given current political and legal hurdles for the US armed forces in Japan to be deployed in situations that do not directly involve the defense of Japanese territory, a modernized alliance C2 structure could have a considerable impact for Taipei given that US intervention is one of the centers of gravity for Taiwan’s defense.

A streamlined alliance C2 structure also offers several operational benefits for the US-Japan alliance by facilitating bilateral defense planning and elevating the alliance’s ability to seamlessly respond to a scenario over Taiwan by fighting together.⁴⁴ Closer coordination through updated alliance C2 assists in addressing difficult defense planning trade-offs, such as between force survivability and military effectiveness due to reduced firepower because of dispersed force posture.⁴⁵ For example, the US Marine Corps’ expeditionary advanced base operation (EABO) concept that emphasizes the need for an integrated yet dispersed force makes close coordination between the United States and Japan vital for defense planning. Managing a dispersed force that operates as several small units for better maneuver makes operational coordination vital.

Fortifying Japan’s Southwest Islands

The fortification of Japan’s Sakishima Islands—a group of southwestern islands that are particularly close to Taiwan—could serve as a strong deterrent and a key enabler of an active denial strategy by severely restricting China’s freedom to maneuver in areas surrounding Taiwan.⁴⁶ An active denial strategy, therefore, denies a quick and decisive victory for Beijing. Yonaguni, the westernmost island

The US and Japan have been investing in at least 3 measures to deter Chinese aggression

of the Japanese archipelago, is only seventy miles away from Taiwan's eastern coast. Miyako, the most eastern island among this group of islands, is still merely 255 miles away from Taipei and separated by the 185 miles-wide Miyako Strait from the main Okinawa Island. Against the backdrop of increasing Chinese military activities in the East China Sea in the 2000s, Tokyo has started to strengthen its defense posture in the Sakishima Islands by establishing Ground Self-Defense Force bases on Yonaguni, Ishigaki, and Miyako.

The gradual fortification of these islands is predominantly designed for Japan's own territorial defense and, as such, is a feasible way for Tokyo to contribute to bolstering deterrence under its current legal framework.⁴⁷ The long-range Patriot PAC-3 radars and the JGSDF Type-12 and Type-03 medium-range surface-to-ship missile systems, which have already been deployed, could possibly serve as Japan's own anti-access/area denial (A2/AD) bubble that could significantly complicate China's ability to maneuver in areas in the northern and eastern parts of Taiwan.⁴⁸ In addition, the US Marine Corps has plans to deploy the High Mobility Artillery Rocket System (HIMARS) to the Southwest Islands as well as the Philippines in case of a conflict in the area, which complements the existing fortification by the Japanese Ground Self-Defense Force. These capabilities could complicate China's operational planning, denying Beijing a quick and decisive victory.⁴⁹ These measures, which contribute to an active denial strategy by leveraging regional geography, could play an outsized role in shaping the regional military balance.

Expanding Multilateral Defense Frameworks

In the case of a protracted war, the expansion of multilateral security frameworks could play a key role in denying Beijing's path to escalate a regional conflict horizontally by expanding its geographical scope.⁵⁰ Enhanced strategic cohesion

China may attempt to escalate the conflict to the Korean Peninsula

among US allies in the western Pacific—often referred to as latticework—would make coercive diplomacy and deterrence more effective, especially since China and Russia have actively sought to drive a wedge among US allies in the region to undermine their cohesion.⁵¹ A notable example is the expansion of the trilateral defense relationship between the United States, Japan, and South Korea

which is informed by a growing appetite for a regional approach to contingency planning that possibly involves Taiwan.⁵² In a protracted war, China may attempt to escalate the conflict to the Korean Peninsula to turn a war over the Taiwan Strait into a regional conflagration.⁵³ While it is unlikely that Seoul

would become a direct belligerent in a war across the Strait, South Korea's contribution to bolstering deterrence in the Korean Peninsula could have direct implications for a larger conflict.⁵⁴

Additionally, closer strategic cohesion among the three states would diminish China's ability to adopt diversionary tactics in a war in the western Pacific. For example, while North Korea's outdated military capabilities seemingly do not pose an existential threat to Japan, recent research suggests that Pyongyang could instill fear among the Japanese population through missile strikes, which may have an outsized political impact by complicating Tokyo's decision in playing an active role in a regional conflict.⁵⁵ The expansion of this trilateral defense relationship, therefore, has direct implications for deterring Chinese aggression by explicitly demonstrating the hurdles in escalating a military conflict over Taiwan by expanding its geographical scope.

In a similar fashion, the growing strategic partnership between the United States, Japan, and the Philippines that highlights the convergence between a Taiwan contingency and Chinese maritime aggression in the South China Sea could have similar effects by narrowing Beijing's room for horizontal escalation. In parallel with Japan, the Philippines is also a frontline state in the western Pacific, and the US-Philippines alliance could also play a consequential role in shaping the military balance over Taiwan. Manila confronts Beijing in the South China Sea while also bordering Taiwan in the north, including the strategically located Batanes Islands in the Luzon Strait, which are only 120 miles away from Taiwan's southern tip.⁵⁶ These islands could become a key enabler for an active denial strategy that restricts China's freedom of maneuver in areas surrounding the southern half of Taiwan, including the city of Kaohsiung which hosts the largest port for the self-governing island. Despite the Philippines' key defense role in the western Pacific, Manila has suffered from limited defense capacity while confronting multiple fronts, including insurgencies which have dominated their defense policy.⁵⁷ In addition, as the importance of US-Philippines defense relations for the regional balance of power grows, China has been seeking to undermine the cohesion of the US-Philippines alliance by taking actions that may drive a wedge between the two allies, as manifested in Beijing's maritime coercion against Manila.⁵⁸ The trilateral defense relationship, along with the modernization of the US-Philippines alliance, could remedy these limitations while tightening strategic cohesion among the three states to complicate China's calculations.⁵⁹

In addition, the trilateral defense relationship between the United States, Australia, and Japan would play an important role in a protracted war by enabling the effective implementation of posture resiliency.⁶⁰ The United States and Japan are at the frontline and thus military bases in Japan are particularly vulnerable to PLA missile strikes.⁶¹ Australia's strategic depth enables the effective

implementation of posture resiliency through the dispersion of forces and capabilities that enhance force survivability, helping the United States and Japan endure and prevail in a protracted war.⁶² The Reciprocal Access Agreement, signed between Canberra and Tokyo in 2022, further expanded this trilateral relationship's capacity to institutionalize their defense cooperation for collective deterrence.⁶³ A closer partnership with Australia demonstrates that the United States and Japan are well-prepared to endure in a war of attrition through improved force survivability which would diminish Beijing's chances of achieving a quick and decisive victory.

Finally, the quadrilateral grouping among the United States, Australia, India, and Japan—more commonly known as the Quad—also offers unique benefits in preparing for a protracted war.⁶⁴ While this grouping is not *primarily* focused on security cooperation, as a forum of four major naval powers in the Indo-Pacific it has had an emphasis on maritime security cooperation. Robust naval powers have a clear advantage in enduring and eventually prevailing in a war of attrition. Further collaboration among the four main naval powers could thus offer outsized benefits for Taiwan in the likely case a war over the Strait turns into a protected war. The US-Japan alliance's role as one of the key facilitators in developing these multilateral defense relations uniquely carries several operational benefits in developing the capacity for the United States, allies, and partners to endure in a war of attrition.

Lessons from Ukraine: Who's Learning What?

Deterrence is a crucial measure to prevent devastating major conflicts from occurring. Nevertheless, there are several underlying dilemmas or trade-offs that deserve attention. Russia's invasion of Ukraine presents two seemingly contradictory yet interconnected lessons for deterrence and great power wars. It has demonstrated the importance of denying one's opponent a quick and decisive victory; Kyiv's resilience shattered Moscow's wishful thinking to do so.⁶⁵ At the same time, even though the war has turned into a protracted war, Russia has nevertheless been able to largely prevent direct US intervention, which is something that China may be taking note of as a positive lesson.⁶⁶ Even if deterrence measures are fully maximized, the question remains how those measures shape the opponent's perception and strategy.

First and foremost, while an effective outcome of the aforementioned deterrence measures may yield positive results by discouraging Beijing from taking military action, it would likely prompt China to increasingly resort to means short of war to achieve their political objective to undermine Taiwan's political autonomy. Though gray zone provocations do not necessarily constitute an

existential threat to Taiwan in isolation, their cumulative application could eventually jeopardize Taiwan's political autonomy and social-economic system.⁶⁷ In other words, if the United States and Japan were to commit to preserving the cross-Strait status quo, namely the political autonomy of the self-governing island, there must be a broader conception of deterrence that includes certain non-kinetic tactics which could severely undermine Taipei's autonomy.⁶⁸

An intractable dilemma in deterrence is that its effective implementation often makes questions over ways to handle gray zone tactics even more salient.⁶⁹ Gray zone tactics are often regarded as a way to manage escalation so as to achieve political ends with minimal cost and, most importantly, to prevent external intervention.⁷⁰ Gray zone provocations thrive on ambiguity. In order to counter gray zone provocations, one must remove that ambiguity.⁷¹ Therefore, it is necessary to demonstrate willingness to escalate where necessary in order to effectively counter gray zone tactics which may severely impact the status quo over Taiwan.⁷² There is a need to treat the entire range of scenarios over the Taiwan Strait—from non-kinetic to a full-scale military conflict—as a comprehensive escalation dynamic.

Moreover, deterrence is most effective under a balanced combination of the demonstration of both strength and reassurance.⁷³ Diplomatic engagement and efforts in managing cross-Strait relations are also crucial steps in bolstering deterrence and maintaining a stable status quo.⁷⁴ As Cold War examples demonstrate, the exaggeration of an opponent's intentions could inadvertently fuel a mutual spiral of suspicion which could accelerate escalation or result in an unintended conflict informed by miscalculation.⁷⁵ In addition, the way states conceptualize deterrence differs, and it is important to assess China's own conception of deterrence and security in order to effectively influence their strategic behavior. In this endeavor, the United States and Japan need to be mindful of the delicate political settings that shape Taiwan's diplomatic position as the US-China rivalry intensifies.⁷⁶ The center of gravity of cross-Strait relations is, in fact, a political challenge that also stems from the Chinese Civil War. Hence, it will be useful to reassure Beijing that the United States and partners are committed to the current status quo that keeps Taiwan's status purposely vague while preserving its political autonomy.

This is another example of how important it is that political leaders in Washington, Taipei, and Tokyo are on the same page over the desired end goal over the Taiwan Strait and the means of achieving it. Given the enormous difficulty in taking over the self-governed island by force, the likelihood of Beijing resorting to it is not necessarily high, especially if deterrence is effectively

The center of gravity of cross-Strait relations is, in fact, a political challenge

implemented. However, if China subjectively perceives actions taken by Taiwan or the United States as an unacceptable provocation, there is still a chance that Beijing would resort to military action.⁷⁷ It is therefore vital to also pay attention to “face-saving” to prevent an armed conflict across the Taiwan Strait from occurring.

A Modernized Alliance and the Taiwan Strait

Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi’s statement in November 2025 on Japan’s potential role in an armed conflict across the Taiwan Strait attracted broad attention. However, it does not suggest a major change in Tokyo’s approach to a Taiwan contingency. Due to the proximity of Japan’s Sakishima Islands, especially Yonaguni Island which is only 70 miles from the eastern coast of Taiwan, a cross-Strait military conflict would ultimately be inseparable from Tokyo’s own territorial defense. As such, for Japan, the best course of action is to invest in enhancing deterrent power through its alliance with the United States to prevent an armed conflict from happening in the first place.

This article illustrated how different ways that the US-Japan alliance has been modernized could shape Beijing’s strategic calculation and dissuade China from taking a full-scale military action. The alliance is seeking to do so by raising the credibility of possible US intervention in a Taiwan scenario, restricting China’s freedom of movement in a conflict, and expanding collective capacity for the United States, Japan, and Taiwan to prevail in a war of attrition. These measures collectively deny China’s ability to achieve a quick and decisive victory while raising the likelihood that any conflict involving Taiwan would turn into a protracted war, a risky path for Beijing given their concerns over regime security. By making a military conflict a costly and unattractive option for Beijing, these measures play a key role in bolstering deterrence across the Taiwan Strait.

In addition, it is useful to note that these ongoing developments synchronize with Taiwan’s gradual embrace of an asymmetric approach to defense. Since institutionalizing trilateral security cooperation among the United States, Japan, and Taiwan is challenging due to political circumstances, fostering a shared understanding of how the respective approaches collectively contribute to deterrence is crucial in maintaining peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait.⁷⁸ A severe disintegration of ends and means as well as discords among the three parties could inadvertently undermine cross-Strait stability by sending unclear signals over intentions and resolve to Beijing.⁷⁹

On the other hand, though preventing a major war from occurring is undoubtedly the most important agenda, enhancing combat effectiveness in case of an

actual armed conflict is a different story.⁸⁰ As this article illustrated, deterrence focuses on restricting the opponent's movements and improving force survivability through force dispersion among other means. In addition, these measures taken for deterrence are purposefully non-escalatory as they also focus on crisis stability. Deterrence, therefore, comes within an underlying dilemma where it may undermine combat effectiveness through reduced firepower and lethality.⁸¹ While ongoing efforts are effective ways to bolster deterrence, Washington and Tokyo will need to take a step further to consider how they would fight together if the worst-case scenario happens.

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